

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE		Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188
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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 10 Sep 14	2. REPORT TYPE FINAL	3. DATES COVERED (From - To) 1 Jul 12 - 30 Jun 14
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Experience of Postpartum Active Duty Women in Training for the Fitness		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER N/A
		5b. GRANT NUMBER HT9404-12-1-TS07
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER N/A
6. AUTHOR(S) Armitage, Nicole H., Lt Col, USAF, NC, PhD, RN		5d. PROJECT NUMBER N12-P02
		5e. TASK NUMBER N/A
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER N/A
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Washington State University Office of Grant & Research Development, 423 Neill Hall PO Box 643140, Pullman, WA 99164-3140		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER N/A
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) TriService Nursing Research Program, 4301 Jones Bridge RD Bethesda, MD 20814		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) TSNRP
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) N12-P02
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited		
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES N/A		
14. ABSTRACT Purpose: To explore the experiences of active duty women as they prepare for their fitness assessment after childbirth in order to develop a better understanding of this phenomenon. Design: This was phenomenological study and a Heideggerian hermeneutic approach was specifically used to interpret meaning in the experiences of active duty postpartum women. Methods: A purposive sampling method was used. Data were obtained through face-face audio-recorded interviews. Interviews were transcribed into text and then analyzed by a research team using an interpretive methodology informed by Heidegger Sample: Fourteen participants were recruited from two U.S. Air Force bases. Participants were all active duty Air Force women who were between 6 and 18 months postpartum. Analysis: A research team comprised of the PI and two of the AIs analyzed the transcribed test through a methodical process. This was an iterative process beginning with review of each transcript for commonalities. Finally, after re-review of all the transcripts and through discourse among the research team members, the researchers identified patterns that described the meanings of all of the experiences. Findings: Two overarching patterns emerged from the analysis: <i>Striving to Perform under Pressure through Profound Life Transitions of Childbirth</i> , and <i>Seeking Understanding from Others</i> . These patterns describe what it means to be an active duty woman preparing for a fitness assessment after childbirth. Implications for Military Nursing: Results of this study can inform future nursing interventions aimed at assisting women prepare for their postpartum fitness assessments while maintaining optimal health. Nurses could also use results to advised U.S. Air Force leaders in application of existing policy to better support childbearing active duty women.		

15. SUBJECT TERMS postpartum fitness assessments, nursing interventions, fit and ready force, care for all entrusted to our care					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 18	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Debra Esty
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER <i>(include area code)</i> 301-319-0596

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98)
 Prescribed by ANSI Std. Z39.18

TriService Nursing Research Program Final Report Cover Page

Sponsoring Institution	TriService Nursing Research Program
Address of Sponsoring Institution	4301 Jones Bridge Road Bethesda MD 20814
USU Grant Number	HT9404-12-1-TS07
USU Project Number	N12-P02
Title of Research Study or Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) Project	Experience of Postpartum Active Duty Women in Training for the Fitness Assessment
Period of Award	1 July 2012 – 30 June 2014
Applicant Organization	Washington State University
Address of Applicant Organization	423 Neill Hall P.O. Box 643140 Pullman, WA 99164-3140

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Abstract

Purpose: To explore the experiences of active duty women as they prepare for their fitness assessment after childbirth in order to develop a better understanding of this phenomenon.

Design: This was a phenomenological study and a Heideggerian hermeneutic approach was specifically used to interpret meaning in the experiences of active duty postpartum women.

Methods: A purposive sampling method was used. Data were obtained through face-to-face audio-recorded interviews. Interviews were transcribed into text and then analyzed by a research team using an interpretive methodology informed by Heidegger.

Sample: Fourteen participants were recruited from two U.S. Air Force bases. Participants were all active duty Air Force women who were between 6 and 18 months postpartum.

Analysis: A research team comprised of the PI and two of the AIs analyzed the transcribed text through a methodical process. This was an iterative process beginning with review of each transcript for common ideas and themes. Next, each subsequent transcript was compared to prior transcripts for commonalities. Finally, after re-review of all the transcripts and through discourse among the research team members, the researchers identified patterns that described the meanings of all of the experiences.

Findings: Two overarching patterns emerged from the analysis: *Striving to Perform under Pressure through Profound Life Transitions of Childbirth*, and *Seeking Understanding from Others*. These patterns describe what it means to be an active duty woman preparing for a fitness assessment after childbirth.

Implications for Military Nursing: Results of this study can inform future nursing interventions aimed at assisting women prepare for their postpartum fitness assessments while maintaining optimal health. Nurses could also use results to advise U.S. Air Force leaders in application of existing policy to better support childbearing active duty women.

TSNRP Research Priorities that Study or Project Addresses**Primary Priority**

Force Health Protection:	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Fit and ready force <input type="checkbox"/> Deploy with and care for the warrior <input type="checkbox"/> Care for all entrusted to our care
Nursing Competencies and Practice:	<input type="checkbox"/> Patient outcomes <input type="checkbox"/> Quality and safety <input type="checkbox"/> Translate research into practice/evidence-based practice <input type="checkbox"/> Clinical excellence <input type="checkbox"/> Knowledge management <input type="checkbox"/> Education and training
Leadership, Ethics, and Mentoring:	<input type="checkbox"/> Health policy <input type="checkbox"/> Recruitment and retention <input type="checkbox"/> Preparing tomorrow's leaders <input type="checkbox"/> Care of the caregiver
	<input type="checkbox"/>

Secondary Priority

Force Health Protection:	<input type="checkbox"/> Fit and ready force <input type="checkbox"/> Deploy with and care for the warrior <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Care for all entrusted to our care
Nursing Competencies and Practice:	<input type="checkbox"/> Patient outcomes <input type="checkbox"/> Quality and safety <input type="checkbox"/> Translate research into practice/evidence-based practice <input type="checkbox"/> Clinical excellence <input type="checkbox"/> Knowledge management <input type="checkbox"/> Education and training
Leadership, Ethics, and Mentoring:	<input type="checkbox"/> Health policy <input type="checkbox"/> Recruitment and retention <input type="checkbox"/> Preparing tomorrow's leaders <input type="checkbox"/> Care of the caregiver
Other:	<input type="checkbox"/>

Progress Towards Achievement of Specific Aims of the Study or Project

Findings related to each specific aim, research or study questions, and/or hypothesis:

Specific Aim:

1. Describe and interpret the experience of active duty women as they train for the Air Force fitness assessment taken at 6 months postpartum.

Research Question:

1. What is the meaning of the experience of preparing for the Air Force fitness assessment after childbirth?

Fourteen women were interviewed about their experiences in training for the U.S. Air Force (USAF) fitness assessment in the first 6 months postpartum. These interviews were transcribed into text and analyzed by the research team. In addition, texts from three women who were interviewed using the same methodology in a preliminary study were added to the interpretation of the data bringing the total number of analyzed interviews to 17. Also, the 14 women in the primary study were asked demographic questions at the end of the interview. These demographic data were obtained in order to describe the population, not to make comparisons between groups, and can be found in the Demographic Characteristics of the Sample table below and in Table 1. The research team also discovered from the interviews that the participants came from a variety of backgrounds, ethnicities, occupations, and ranks.

Table 1. Results of Nominal Demographic Characteristics

Type of Delivery*	Feeding method first 6 months	Physical Training while Pregnant	Reasons for lower intensity training postpartum	Reported Emotional Difficulties
Vaginal N=12	Breast N=4	Yes N=11	Medical Advice N=11	Sadness/lowered self-esteem N=4
Cesarean N=5	Bottle N=1 Both N=9	No N=3	Perinatal complications N=6 Breastfeeding Issues N=8	Fear of failing fitness assessment N=11

*Known data from 3 pilot study participants included

During the analysis process, the research team identified several common ideas which were: coping with physical challenges; preparation versus lack of preparation; seeking/not seeking support; perceiving baby as help or hindrance; striving to perform in role of Airman and role of mother; perception of asking for special treatment; dealing with the unknown; and needing to stay/feeling trapped in their job for financial concerns. These common ideas were found to be important aspects of the participants' experiences and pointed to a deeper meaning of the phenomenon of interest. Continued interpretive analysis revealed a meaning common to all 17

of the stories. The meaning of the experiences of postpartum women in training for the Air Force fitness assessment can be described with two overarching patterns: *Striving to Perform under Pressure through Profound Life Transitions of Childbirth* and *Seeking Understanding from Others*. These patterns reflect the meaning of the experiences of all of the participants despite their demographic differences.

The first pattern, *Striving to Perform under Pressure through Profound Life Transitions of Childbirth*, encompassed several common ideas. One of these common ideas was striving to perform as both an Airman and a mother. Typically, the participants struggled as they tried to balance their roles as Airman and mother. Furthermore, most of the participants wanted to exceed in their performance of both roles rather than to just meet expectations. A second common idea was feeling under pressure. Most of the participants described feeling added pressure to perform well on their fitness assessment or risk not progressing in their careers. Many participants stated that they felt pressure to train for their fitness assessment within certain time constraints, which some participants perceived as unreasonable. Many reported that they feared failing their fitness assessments and some engaged in unhealthy behaviors as a result. A third common idea in Pattern 1 was living through the profound life transition of childbirth. This life transition involved physical, emotional, and social changes and was unlike any other life transition. Physical changes described by the participants included loss of conditioning and muscle strength, increased pain with physical conditioning, higher than expected weight gain, and changes related to breastfeeding. Emotional changes included feelings of sadness, feeling emotionally drained, feeling overwhelmed, and lowered self-esteem. Social changes included adjusting to caring for a newborn and adjusting to military specific transitions such as geographic relocation, job changes, and spousal deployments.

The second pattern, *Seeking Understanding from Others*, is interrelated with the first pattern and further describes what it means to be an active duty woman who trains for the Air Force fitness assessment after childbirth. Common ideas encompassed by this pattern included seeking understanding in general, seeking/not seeking support, and seeking guidance. The perception of the participants was that few people understood what they were going through including health care providers, supervisors, co-workers, and family members. Many of the participants stated that supervisors and leaders demonstrated a lack of understanding by being too rigid in how they applied USAF policies. In addition, many reported that family members did not seem to understand why they were struggling to train for their fitness assessments. The common idea of seeking/not seeking support was also evident in the participants' stories. Many reported a reluctance to seek support because they thought they would be perceived as asking for "special favors" or that they would be perceived as being malingerers trying to "get out of taking their tests". Many participants, therefore, chose not to seek support. Conversely, the participants who did seek and receive support from family members and/or co-workers said that this made a tremendous difference in their ability to train. The third common theme in Pattern 2 was seeking guidance. Most participants perceived that they did not get the guidance that they needed to prepare for the fitness assessment safely. Furthermore, when they sought guidance, they had trouble finding it. The one notable exception to this was guidance from physical therapists. The five women who reported being referred to physical therapy said that they did receive guidance on how to train physically for their fitness assessments.

Relationship of current findings to previous findings: Two preliminary studies were conducted by members of the research team. In the first study, fitness component measurements

prior to pregnancy were compared to measurements postpartum. Results indicated that performance on run, push-up, and abdominal circumference components were poorer during the postpartum period when compared to the pre-pregnancy time- frame (Armitage & Smart, 2012). The results from the current study are consistent with this previous study in that they show that many women struggle with training for their postpartum fitness assessment.

The second preliminary study conducted by members of the research was a pilot to the current study and showed that the methodology and research design were feasible and would address the research question, but that more data were needed to make a full analysis. Data from the pilot study were consistent with data from the current study and were incorporated into the interpretive analysis.

Findings from the full analysis in the current study indicated that the experience of training for the fitness assessment was inextricably tied to transitioning to motherhood. Previous studies have shown that the transition to motherhood alone can include a great deal of emotional, social, and physical distress (Nelson, 2003; Cowan & Cowan, 1995; Gutke, Lundberg, Ostgaard & Oberg, 2011). Participants from this study described similar distress when training for their fitness assessments. Therefore, it is possible that training for the fitness assessment may exacerbate emotional, social, and physical distress, and a greater understanding of this phenomenon provided by the results of this study can contribute to future clinical interventions and research.

Effect of problems or obstacles on the results: There were no specific problems or obstacles on the results. Data obtained through transcripts of face-to-face interviews were more than sufficient to obtain valid and meaningful results through the interpretive methodology that was used.

Limitations: The purpose of this study was to develop understanding about a particular phenomenon in order to inform practice, policy, and future research. The results contribute to the understanding of the experiences of the study participants and provide an understanding of many other women who have similar experiences. However, the results do not necessarily contribute to an understanding of the experiences of all postpartum active duty women.

Conclusion: The specific aim of this study was to describe and interpret the experience of active duty women as they train for the Air Force fitness assessment taken at 6 months postpartum. This aim was achieved through an interpretive analysis of the experiences of 17 USAF active duty postpartum women. The research team identified two patterns that describe what it means to exist as an active duty woman who is preparing for the USAF fitness assessment taken 6 months after childbirth. These patterns were: *Striving to Perform under Pressure through Profound Life Transitions of Childbirth* and *Seeking Understanding from Others*. These patterns included common ideas of: striving to perform as mother and Airman; pressures of time constraints and fear of failure; physical, emotional and social changes associated with the transition of childbirth; seeking understanding in general; seeking/not seeking support from others; and seeking guidance. Results of this study contribute to a greater understanding of the phenomenon of preparing for the Air Force fitness test after childbirth. These results can be used by clinicians to improve practice and to better advise USAF leaders on local application of existing policy.

Significance of Study or Project Results to Military Nursing

This study elucidates the experience many women have in preparing for a fitness test during a time of profound transition. The results can help nurses understand this experience and develop meaningful interventions for women who are going through similar experiences. Results from this study along with what is known from existing literature suggest that active duty women may be at increased risk for emotional and physical health problems at the time they are preparing for their first fitness assessment after childbirth. All of the women in this study indicated a desire to perform well on their fitness assessment and went to great lengths to do so, with some preparing in ways that they thought could be harmful to their overall health.

Implications for Clinical Practice

Results from this study suggest that women may benefit from more anticipatory guidance not only for what to expect with physical training after delivery but also how to maintain fitness and prevent excess weight gain during pregnancy. The participants typically perceived that they did not get the direction or guidance from reliable sources that they needed in order to prepare for their fitness assessments safely. Moreover, many felt overwhelmed when they discovered how much conditioning they had lost during pregnancy. Many of the participants also were taken by surprise at the effects of excessive weight gain during pregnancy on their ability to prepare for the fitness assessment postpartum. They were often dismayed at how difficult it was to lose weight within the initial 6 months postpartum. Results also indicated that more guidance on how to condition and lose weight while breastfeeding would be beneficial.

These results strongly suggest that close follow-up of active duty women after delivery is essential in order to specifically address issues related to regaining physical fitness, including physical conditioning, nutrition, and lactation. In addition, active duty USAF women should be given information about how and when to access military healthcare systems for complications that may be exacerbated by strenuous exercise. Likewise, if not already being done, liberal referrals to physical therapy should be considered for active duty postpartum women exhibiting any pain or physical problems while preparing for their fitness assessments. Similarly, referrals to existing supporting base services such as Nutritional Medicine, the Health and Wellness Center, and the New Parent Support Program should be strongly considered.

Implications for Policy

The participants in this study clearly indicated that they desired understanding from supervisors and co-workers without being perceived as asking for special favors or treatment. The profound emotional, physical, and social changes that active duty women undergo during pregnancy and the postpartum period need to be acknowledged and accounted for when helping them to regain full mission readiness. These changes, although commonplace among female military members, are not quite the same as any other condition or situation a military member may face. The number of active duty childbearing women in the USAF is estimated to be in the thousands and, as with all Airmen, a significant amount of time and money has been invested in their training and preparation to carry out the USAF mission. Therefore, it would be prudent to have good policies in place that support these women in their efforts to regain and maintain mission readiness after childbirth.

It is evident from existing literature and these study results that women may not be physically ready to fully participate in unit physical training as soon as they return from maternity leave. Pushing women to do so increases their risk of injury and thus additional time away from their duty sections. Nurses can advise unit supervisors and Air Force leaders on risks of overly intensive training to women in the initial postpartum period, and recommend leeway in

unit training according to individual circumstances. In addition, nurses could recommend that postpartum women routinely be given an individualized “profile” during the postpartum period outlining incremental participation in physical training.

The stress that many of these women undergo in preparing for their fitness assessment could be mitigated by easing strict deadlines and allowing for more recovery time in individuals with complications. Compounding the stress of the postpartum transition with the added stress to prepare for a fitness assessment in too short a time runs the risk of detrimental health effects to the individual and her child. Although six months post childbirth may be enough time for many, or even most, active duty women to prepare, it is not necessarily enough time for all women depending on their circumstances. While there is currently an avenue for women to seek “profiles” to extend their time to train, the participants in this study were reluctant to do so citing that they thought they would be perceived as asking for special favors. Nurses could be advocates to women who might additional time to train by advising supervisors and commanders to encourage postpartum women to seek “profiles” and advice from medical personnel as needed.

Implications for Future Research

The focus of this study was to develop an understanding of the phenomenon of preparing for the USAF fitness assessment after childbirth. The participants of this study have described certain aspects of their experience that are worth exploring with further research. For example, more research on the impact of certain interventions in facilitating the ability of women to prepare for the assessment in a safe way is warranted. This could include anticipatory guidance strategies provided for women during pregnancy and postpartum involving more information about what to expect with physical training and weight management. Research could also include developing postpartum “profiles” that comply with current readiness standards and outline incremental increases in physical training for the first few months postpartum.

Research regarding current strategies used by clinicians to address the healthcare needs of childbearing active duty women as they prepare for their fitness assessment is also needed. Along the same lines, research on current practices for physical training requirements for childbearing Airmen in the work centers is needed. Qualitative research that involves the perspectives of USAF clinicians and leaders in regards to physical training in childbearing active duty populations should also be considered. Research in these areas could help to improve current practices to facilitate optimal health in this population.

In addition, more research on the experience of active duty women preparing for their fitness assessments at other AFBs is needed. Women in other geographic locations or commands may have different experiences from the participants in this study. This research would help nurses gain a better understanding and insight into whether the experiences of the participants in this study are common to those of other USAF women.

Lastly, it is apparent from this study that many women do struggle with preparing for the fitness assessment after childbirth. The fact that they are able to prepare to the point of not only passing but also often doing well by 6 months postpartum despite all of their physical and emotional challenges is quite extraordinary. This may indicate that this population is exceptionally resilient and more research regarding resiliency in this area may be warranted.

Changes in Clinical Practice, Leadership, Management, Education, Policy, and/or Military Doctrine that Resulted from Study or Project

None to date.

References Cited

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Summary of Dissemination

Type of Dissemination	Citation	Date and Source of Approval for Public Release
Publications	Armitage, N.H., Severtsen, B.M., Vandermause, R. & Smart, D.A. (2014). Training for the Air Force fitness assessment: The experience of postpartum women. Military Medicine, 179 (7), 766-772. doi: 10.7205/MILMED-D-13-00437	11 Sep 13 60th Air Mobility Wing Public Affairs Office
Publications in Press	None	
Published	None	
Podium Presentations	Author: Nicole Armitage Title: Experience of Postpartum Active Duty Women in Training for the U.S. Air Force Fitness Assessment Event Name: David Grant Medical Center 1st Annual Research Symposium Location: Travis AFB, CA Date: 15 May 13 Sponsoring Agency: 60th Medical Group/Clinical Investigations Facility	30 April 2013 60th Medical Group Clinical Investigations Facility

Poster Presentations	<p>1. Authors: Nicole Armitage, Billie Severtsen, Roxanne Vandermause, Denise Smart</p> <p>Title: Preparing For The U.S. Air Force Fitness Test: The Experience Of Postpartum Women</p> <p>Event Name: TSNRP Research and EBP Dissemination Course</p> <p>Location: San Antonio, TX</p> <p>Date: 16 Sep 14</p> <p>Sponsoring Agency: TriService Nursing Research Program</p>	<p>9 Jan 2014</p> <p>60th Air Mobility Wing Public Affairs Office</p>
	<p>2. Authors: Nicole Armitage, Billie Severtsen, Roxanne Vandermause, Denise Smart</p> <p>Title: Preparing For The U.S. Air Force Fitness Test: The Experience Of Postpartum Women</p> <p>Event Name: 47th Annual Communicating Nursing Research Conference</p> <p>Location: Seattle, WA</p> <p>Date: 10 Apr 14</p> <p>Sponsoring Agency: Western Institute of Nursing</p>	<p>9 Jan 2014</p> <p>60th Air Mobility Wing Public Affairs Office</p>
	<p>3. Authors: Nicole Armitage, Billie Severtsen, Roxanne Vandermause, Denise Smart</p> <p>Title: Experience of Postpartum Active Duty Women in Training for the Fitness Assessment</p> <p>Event Name: AMSUS 2013 Annual Meeting</p> <p>Location: Seattle, WA</p> <p>Date: 7 Nov 13</p> <p>Sponsoring Agency: Association of Military Surgeons U.S. (AMSUS)</p>	<p>11 Sep 2013</p> <p>60th Air Mobility Wing Public Affairs Office</p>
	<p>4. Authors: Nicole Armitage, Billie Severtsen, Roxanne Vandermause, Denise Smart</p> <p>Title: Experience of Postpartum Active Duty Women in Training for the Fitness Assessment</p> <p>Event Name: David Grant Medical Center 1st Annual Research Symposium</p> <p>Location: Travis AFB, CA</p> <p>Date: 15 May 13</p> <p>Sponsoring Agency: 60th Medical Group/Clinical Investigations Facility</p>	<p>30 April 2013</p> <p>60th Medical Group Clinical Investigations Facility</p>

Media Reports	<p>1. Media Type: On-line and print journal article, <i>U.S. Medicine</i> Title: New Mothers May Need Counseling, Training to Pass Postpartum Military Fitness Test Date: May 2014 issue Author: Annette M. Boyle</p> <p>2. Media Type: Newspaper article, <i>Air Force Times</i> Title: Postpartum Adds PT Stress for Moms Date: 7 October 2013 issue Author: Oriana Pawlyk</p> <p>3. Media Type: Radio Story/Interview Radio Station: KIV out of Seattle, WA Date: 16 July 2012</p> <p>4. Media Type: WSU News Press Release Title: Military Moms Required to Pass Fitness Test Months after Giving Birth; Washington State University Doctoral Student Examines Barriers they Face Date: 13 July 2012 Author: Doug Nadvornick</p>	<p>3 April 2014 60th Air Mobility Wing Public Affairs Office</p> <p>19 September 2013 60th Air Mobility Wing Public Affairs Office</p> <p>16 July 2012 92d Air Mobility Wing Public Affairs Office</p> <p>11 July 2012 92d Air Mobility Wing Public Affairs Office</p>
Other		

Reportable Outcomes	
Reportable Outcome	Detailed Description
Applied for Patent	None
Issued a Patent	None
Developed a cell line	None
Developed a tissue or serum repository	None
Developed a data registry	None

Recruitment and Retention Table

Recruitment and Retention Aspect		Number
Number of Subjects Projected in Grant Application		10-15
Subjects Available	Estimated:	110
Subjects Contacted or Reached by Approved Recruitment Method		20
Subjects Screened		20
Subjects Ineligible		3
Subjects Refused		3
Human Subjects Consented		14
Subjects Who Withdrew		0
Subjects Who Completed Study		14
Subjects With Complete Data		14
Subjects with Incomplete Data		0

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Characteristic

Age (yrs)	27.5 (Range 21-35)
Number of Children	1.5 (Range 1-6)
Pre-pregnancy Fitness Score	89.5 (Range 82-95)
Postpartum Fitness Score	89.3 (Range 70-100)
Resumption of Physical Training (weeks postpartum)	8.4 (Range 1-14)
Women, n (%)	(100%)
Race (Not Collected)	
White, n (%)	()
Black, n (%)	()
Hispanic or Latino, n (%)	()
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, n (%)	()
Asian, n (%)	()
Other, n (%)	()
Military Service or Civilian	
Air Force, n (%)	14 (100%)
Army, n (%)	()
Marine, n (%)	()
Navy, n (%)	()
Civilian, n (%)	()
Service Component	
Active Duty, n (%)	14 (100%)
Reserve, n (%)	0
National Guard, n (%)	0
Retired Military, n (%)	0
Prior Military but not Retired, n (%)	0
Military Dependent, n (%)	0
Civilian, n (%)	0

Final Budget Report

No reallocation of funds was needed or requested for the entire reporting period. There are three direct cost TSNRP budget categories for this grant award: supplies, travel, and other.

Summary of supplies: \$1877.31 of the budgeted \$2000 has been expended. The remaining \$122.69 was not needed to complete the study.

Summary of travel: \$4,346.76 of the budgeted \$4552.00 has been expended. The remaining \$205.24 was not needed to complete the study and disseminate research results.

Summary of other: \$1492.20 of the budgeted \$2300 has been expended. These expenditures were for transcription services and preparation of materials for dissemination of results. The remaining \$807.80 was not needed to complete the study and disseminate research results.

Please see the attached official budget for this reporting period (Appendix A).